WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Advancing Skills in the Delivery of Personalized, Proactive, Patient-Driven Care

Workaholism Clinical Tool

This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
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How much work is healthy? Being a hard worker is highly valued in modern society. “Work engagement” is considered by many to be a positive behavior. It is defined as extensive involvement in work, and this is usually equated with a work week that is 50 hours or longer.¹ Work engagement is related not only to superlative job performance but also to positive emotional states and a sense of empowerment, and it has even been linked to better health.²

What is workaholism?

There is a fine line between work engagement and its dark side, workaholism, which is associated with harm to oneself or others related to work behaviors.³ Oates first coined the term workaholism in 1971, defining it as “the compulsion or the uncontrollable need to work incessantly.”⁴ This captures two elements factors that are used in most definitions: work is excessive and work is compulsive. Workaholics have a strong—even irresistible—inner drive and tend to “devote an exceptional amount of time to work and... work beyond what is reasonably expected to meet organizational or economic requirements.”⁵ They frequently think about work even when they are not working, and they often find it impossible to delegate work to others, usually because they do not trust others to work at the same “level” as they do. In short, workaholics behave as do other people with addictions, and they may need help with changing their addictive behaviors.

In some North American studies, as high as one-thirds of the adult working population has self-identified as being workaholic, and most estimates place the prevalence of workaholism somewhere between 8-17.5%.¹ For female attorneys, physicians and psychologists/therapists, studies reveal that the prevalence is as high as 23-25%.¹

Workaholism has many negative effects, ranging from harming family dynamics to damaging a workaholic’s physical health. Burnout, with all of its related health challenges, is a key characteristic of workaholism. See the Clinician Self-Care module. Burnout occurs, in part, because work spills into other spheres of life and because a person exhausts him- or herself.

Other negative effects on health include:¹ ⁶
- Sleep problems
- Exhaustion
- Weight gain
- Hypertension
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Physical pain
Many workaholics also experience what is known in Denmark as “leisure illness.” That is, whenever they stop working on weekends or vacations, they tend to become physically ill.

**How can I tell if I or someone else is a workaholic?**

Robinson lists 10 warnings signs of workaholism. These include:
1. Hurrying and staying busy
2. Need to control
3. Perfectionism
4. Difficulty with relationships
5. Work binges
6. Difficulty relaxing and having fun
7. Memory losses related to conversations or trips caused by exhaustion or preoccupation with work
8. Impatience and irritability
9. Self inadequacy
10. Self neglect

These elements inform most of the workaholism measures commonly used in research. It is useful, for the sake of formal screening, to assess the degree of workaholism a person experiences by having them completing an online version of the Work Addiction Risk Test (WART). This is available at: [http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/00738125/student_view0/chapter4/self-assessment_4_5.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/00738125/student_view0/chapter4/self-assessment_4_5.html). The WART is 25 questions long. By clicking on “Score the Exercise” you can see a breakdown of a person’s overall score around three different areas: compulsive tendencies, need for control, decision impairment. Lastly, a Work Addiction Total Score is given.

**How can workaholism be prevented and treated?**

Workaholism can be addressed at the societal, organizational, and individual levels.

*Societal change* would potentially require an alteration in how work-personal life balance is emphasized. Work closings for holidays can help with this. Employee Assistance Programs which incorporate supportive measures for workaholism, as well as required vacations and the routine assessment of levels of employee work satisfaction and burnout have been suggested as *organizational-level interventions*.

For *individuals* struggling with workaholism, the following could inform the development of Personal Health Plans (PHP):
- Create a **concrete plan for restoring life balance**. This is critical. For example, a PHP should emphasize the various aspects of proactive self-care, including moving the body and leisure activity, as well as time with loved ones. Holistic (integrative) approaches have been suggested. These might include mind-body techniques, acupuncture, and other complementary approaches.
• **Mindful awareness** has the potential to make a positive impact, according to case reports. An important priority is to explore, very intentionally, why one overworks. Is fear involved? Insecurity? Was there a childhood role model who encouraged these behaviors somehow?

• **Formally plan recreational time**, perhaps outlined with the help of a health coach or other facilitator, is frequently recommended.

• **Provide peer norms.** What are the work patterns of others, compared to the workaholic’s? How many hours is the person in the office next door working? Of course, this only helps if coworkers are not engaging in the same dysfunctional work patterns.

• Encourage them to **ask for their family members’ and close friends’ opinions.** This is important, because many workaholics themselves are unaware of behaviors that stand out to others.


• Encourage them in **cognitive behavioral therapy.** This can help with reducing compulsive and “hard-driven” tendencies and enhancing capacity for enjoyment of non-work activities.

• **Use motivational interviewing**, which, while not yet studied in great depth for this specific area, is often suggested.

• **Improve interpersonal skills at work**, including learning to delegate and working effectively with subordinates. Micromanagement and distrust of colleagues lend to greater dysfunction.

• **Focus on quality of work, rather than quantity.** Exploring how to become more efficient at work may help some workaholics. Cultivate trust –through firsthand experience - that a person can actually become more efficient if they attend to relaxation time, family time, and self-care in general. One recent study found that executives who worked an average of 52 hours a week were more effective than those working over 70 hours weekly.

• **Create clear boundaries** when away from work. Unplug cell phones, be clear about when email will or will not be answered, and do not take computers (or paperwork) on vacation.

• Remind people that healing work addiction requires **patience and time.**

• Seek **residential treatment if necessary.** Recovery.org offers a helpline at 1-888-299-5213 that offers guidance with choosing a work addiction recovery center.
Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health? Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php

This clinical tool was written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, Associate Professor and Director of the Academic Integrative Medicine Fellowship Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, and Assistant Director and faculty for the VHA Whole Health: Change the Conversation clinical program.

References